

ABSTRACT

***Crime against Art* by Stuart Wood**

"I write to give myself strength. I write to be the characters that I am not. I write to explore all the things I'm afraid of." – Joss Whedon

The primary aim of this research is to help A level art students feel excited about and engaged in the theory of their subject and not just the creative side of the subject. Working as an art teacher within a large FE college in England, my initial research confirmed that A level Art students view themselves as practical learners, who embrace the practical element of their course (making drawing, painting, photography and digital manipulation). The dominant view among the students is that theory is difficult, dry and often alien to them.

The primary aim of this research is to help the A-level art learners feel excited about and engagement in the theory of their subject. Initial research used surveys and case studies to ascertain issues for art students. There was seen to be a conflict between 'creative' writing and 'academic writing' with student preferring the creative. The next step was to put in place workshops that experimented with the structure of writing and research and made it more attuned to visual creatives by fashioning a 'journal of discovery'. This is something John Berger's 'Ways of Seeing' (1972) and 'Ways of Representing Research' Elliott (1993) encourages, conveying experience and research through imagery.

Art A-level students need to write 1500 to 3000-word research essay. When polled 62% of students felt this was a 'crime against art' and there was no need for it to show their creative ability. Students went through a process of working visually by selecting images of artist's work in teams. Then they dictated these thoughts into their phones to avoid the pen. Only when they had a chunk of notes, did we consider the direction their essay could take. Initial results have shown A-level art students making greater use of contextual information in their work, opinions expressed in coursework had a greater depth of understanding and seeing academic writing less alien and some not to just cut and paste, but to support their creative journey. For some student who was put off the idea of University and the demands of academia have been encouraged to apply, emphasising the democratic rights of enhancement, inclusion and participation for all students, nurtured by Frank Coffield.

Keywords

Academic writing; creative writing; barriers to education; ownership of learning; ways of seeing; ways of representing research and experience; democratic rights.

Crime against Art

Is academic writing a barrier to education for art students?

Introduction

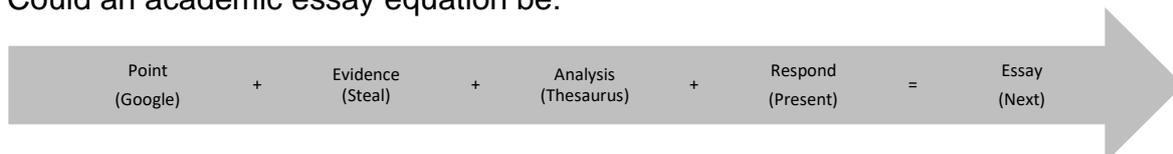
Writing is not just about conveying stuff, but also about the representation of the student's identity. There is a divide in writing between 'creative' writing and 'academic' writing, narrative self-expression versus the formal collection of evidence to further an argument. The latter can give little in the way for the student to show identity and therefore ownership of this work.

My aim is to support Art A-Level students with creating meaningful written research and begin to give them skills and confidence to take on academic qualification. I hoped to develop student approaches to writing by working from the visual into the word via using dictation software and then welding this initial research back to the student's identity through methods of visual presentation and creating an Object of Desire which they personally identify with.

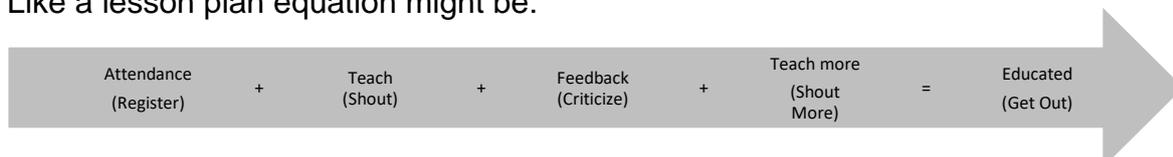
One of the reasons Art students find writing difficult is that they do not feel comfortable with the person they are portraying in their writing. Academic writing can show a conflict of identity for students because the identity they are portrayed in academic writing can feel separate and unloved. One student said to me *'The last time I enjoyed writing was at 13 when I used to read, before fucking GCSE's.'*

This report is to survey and study art student's opinions and approaches to academic writing and see if there are ways of challenging dominant practices, structures, values, beliefs and interests which they embody and considered the best approach.

Could an academic essay equation be:



Like a lesson plan equation might be:



This report is to observe through case studies the issues of student ownership. Rather than seeing the academic writing as the hurdle to jump over for the final grade, like the music student who gets a grade 8 and then bins the saxophone and keeps the paper certificate. I want to examine how different students have used research tasks to create meaningful research that built curiosity and created something they treasured, *'an object of desire'*. Frank Coffield in *'From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery (2012)*, encourages a learning environment that is expansive and develops the abilities of all and moderated by peers.

Through this small-scale project with A level Art Students in a South West FE College. I'm setting out to:

1. To survey students to make the initial observation on how they perceive academic writing in contrast to creative writing.
2. To make several in-depth case studies of art student's perception of written research and how it affects their progression in education.
3. Begin to examine how students can improve their approach to academic writing and combine it with their creative skills to achieve ownership of the document and allowing students to progress.

Some of these research areas pose wider questions around the following areas:

- a) How do 16 to 19-year-old learners communicate their ideas when teenage literacy is so low in the UK? England currently ranks 23rd out of 23 OECD nations for teenage literacy.
- b) How do teachers create scaffolding to allow creative students to succeed in the academic world?
- c) Is teenage literacy lower or is it just different forms of communication taking place in this smartphone era?
- d) What is the educational value of replacing dissertation/report with a more mixed media approach?

These questions are potentially too large to answer in this small-scale study but by undertaking this project I hope to lay a foundation to go on to examine these more fully in future work.

My study aims to explore how students approach academic writing. I wanted to find out if our art-based A level students are reluctant towards valuing academic research and seeing the merit in the process. Also, are there flaws in the current process offered to students which could potentially become a barrier to higher education for some students?

The Problem...Finding Identity

When thinking about the construction of the student's identity in academic writing, it is only natural to turn to the work of Roz Ivanic. In 'Writing and Identity' (1998), Ivanic deconstructs ideas of writer's identity which is initially created from events and experience interpreted through individual storytelling, rather than just evidencing to a bibliography of source materials:

'All our writing is influenced by our life-histories. Each word we write represents an encounter, possibly a struggle, between our multiple past experience and the demands of a new context. Writing is not a neutral activity which we just learn like a physical skill, but it implicates every fibre of the writer's multifaceted being.'

Roz Ivanic builds on the work of Erving Goffman the Canadian-American sociologist and writer, considered by some to be one of the most influential American sociologists of the twentieth century. In 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life', (1956) Erving investigates the connection between an individual identity and appearance, *'And to the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others.'* For an Art student whose primary form of communication is the visual, the written word can become a very hostile place.

All students have differing crafts/skills base. Placing a visual creative in the literary world can create tension and this strain of using what they might consider being the wrong tools to communicate ideas. This can cause a feeling of falsehood as the student questions the value of the work which has no connection to their creative journey as an undergraduate. Howard Gardner looks at the concepts of a broad-ranging approach to problem-solving and gives a democratic voice by looking at the numerous ways individuals wrestle with these ideas. His book, 'Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century', shows control of language and testing structures designed to suit one type of intelligence should not control ideas for all:

"While we may continue to use the words smart and stupid, and while IQ tests may persist for certain purposes, the monopoly of those who believe in a single general intelligence has come to an end. Brain scientists and geneticists are documenting the incredible differentiation of human capacities, computer programmers are creating systems that are intelligent in different ways, and educators are freshly acknowledging that their students have distinctive strengths and weaknesses."

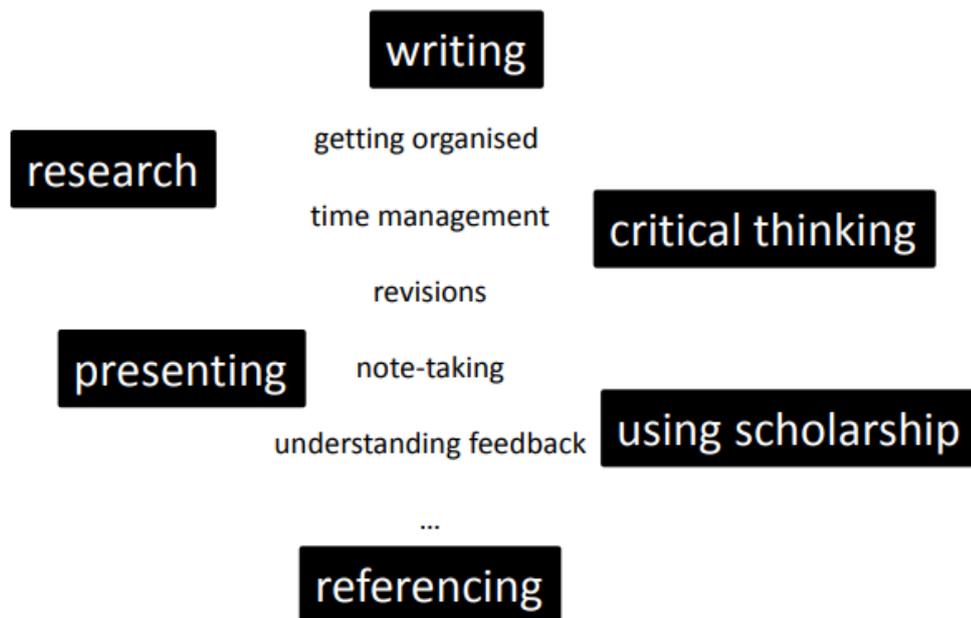
Teenage literacy in England is the lowest in the OECD. We also have another among OECD countries 16-24-year-olds literacy is lower than our current 55-65 (The Independent, 27 November 2017), this would suggest we're going backwards. In the UK one in four children under the age of six now has a smartphone; a study has found (The Sun, 8th April 2018). Young people have replaced reading with social

media and are saturated with imagery (just watch the film Eighth Grade by Bo Burnham, 2018, a child's journey into adulthood is documented via YouTube). How do we engage students with academic writing and allow them to succeed in a world where there is such a focus on going to Higher Education when these courses depend on traditional/outdated essay structures to assess the students thinking and research skills?

Below is a slide from a Plymouth University PowerPoint presentation to support their art students with the written element of the course.

Learning Development

Building students' academic confidence and skills.



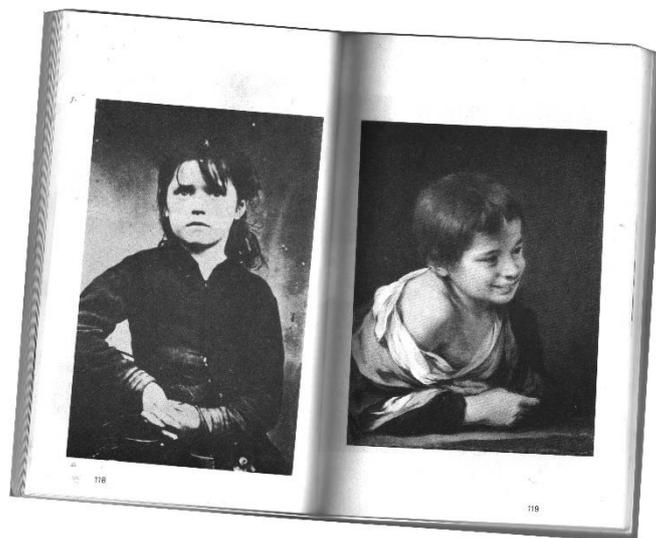
This diagram makes academic writing to be a series of simple steps. As simple as giving a monkey five pounds and telling it to buy some bananas. There are no ideas here just a meaningless scaffolding 'surface knowledge' that leaves a student with a list and no way to generate ideas.

The measure we need to look at is the impact on the student and engaging student in an active discourse with the lecturer as promoted by Socrates. 'Visible Learning into Action' by John Hattie, Deb Masters and Kate Birch continues the importance of effective feedback and listening to the student's needs. Colleges and Universities need to understand how student's progress in differing ways, 'Knowing what impacts means involves an understanding of progressions, where students are in this

progression, allowing for multiple ways up these progressions, and not prescribing one progression for all.'

It's very easy to construct systems that give clear instructions for essay structure, which completely switches off the student. Students not coming from literary backgrounds are instead using, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube. More students are becoming visually literate thinkers. In England, 31% of adults don't read in their free time, rising to 46% of young people aged 16 to 24 (Taking Part Survey: Free Time Activities Focus Report, 2017-18 p. 2). Digital media is destabilizing print media and this needs to be recognised.

In 1972 John Berger through 'Ways of Seeing' liberated art through visual essays. Maybe this approach came about as the book grew from a television series of the same name. It started as a digital format but found its real audience in a printed book. 'Ways of Seeing' started as a four-part television series on the BBC. Berger reacts to the traditional views of Kenneth Clark in the Civilisation series and Gombrich's 'The Story of Art', which describes the march of Western Culture as an unstoppable visual army conquering the world. Berger created a new reading of the masterpieces of Western Art, not just as beautiful things, but cultural artefacts that reveal, upon closer scrutiny, the limitation, prejudice, bias, and obsession of the culture from which they grew. The idea that classic paintings could be decoded to reveal social facts and be compared to advertising and the mechanisms of capitalism.



Graphic designer, Richard Hollis created the layout for 'Ways of Seeing'. The book is in a non-classic form. Not a 2inch doorstop of a book to give biblical importance. 'Ways of Seeing' is a slim book, in an entirely modern form of layout for text and image that was far more accessible for all. A concept that has found its place through Instagram.



The text in 'Ways of Seeing' is broken down into short bursts, usually no more than a paragraph coupled with visual examples. Reflecting on its origins as a television programme, the text and images work simultaneously, one form bouncing off the other. There are five text-and-image essays. But John Berger also adds visual essays with no text. He brings together a series of images that by careful choices and striking comparisons, he makes an essay without the need for words.

Reflecting over these ideas and putting in context with these newspaper articles: 'UK universities in 'plagiarism epidemic' as almost 50,000 students caught cheating over the last 3 year' (Independent 16/1/2016). 'Cheating at UK's top universities soars by 40%' (The Guardian 29/4/2018). How in this modern-times of cut and paste, when it appears the concept of a dissertation are just hurdles rather than pieces of personal research? Austin Kleon in 'Steal like an Artist' (2012) writes, 'While love computers, I think computers have robbed us of the feeling we're actually making something.' He goes onto show the brutal 'cut and paste' world can make without creativity in this simple table:

GOOD THEFT	VS	BAD THEFT
HONOR		DEGRADE
STUDY		SKIM
STEAL FROM MANY		STEAL FROM ONE
CREDIT		PLAGIARIZE
TRANSFORM		IMITATE
REMIX		RIP OFF

As an art teacher, I'm determined to support my students to see the value of research as a method of deepening their ideas and approaches to the arts, by not imposing literate structures on the illiterate, but begin the journey with a creative mess. This research is to help A-level Art students feel more excited about and engaged in the theory of their subject and not just the creative side.

Methodology

This study took place at a large FE college in South West England. The focus groups were taken from three A-Level Graphic Design sets where there is a 50/50 gender split, over other art-based areas, where there are significantly higher female gender percentages (normally just 10% male). The first step of this research was to investigate the students feeling about writing from the past, compare academic writing to creative writing and their perceived ideas what would be expected if they continued onto university.

This information was collected both 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' to begin to see how the student's perceived written research in their art studies. Initial I made one to one interviews with student and gathered information on their feeling on writing and systems they employ to create an essay.

I followed this with a survey with 129 Art students who were asked the following

- 1. Do you enjoy creative writing?**
- 2. Do enjoy academic writing (research).**
- 3. Is there any areas you fear when writing.**
- 4. Have you heard of the word 'dissertation'?**
- 5. How much writing do you feel there should be on a creative arts-based degree course?**
- 6. When was the last time you were proud of something you've written?**
- 7. If it was part of a creative art course was to do a 10000-word research essay, would it put you off doing that course?**
- 8. Have you ever experimented or used different techniques to help support your writing?**

The initial research confirmed that A level Art students view themselves as practical learners, who embrace the practical element of their course (making drawing, painting, photography and digital manipulation). The dominant view among the students is that theory is difficult, dry and often alien to them.

Art A-level students need to write a 1500-3000-word research essay. 62% of students felt this was a 'crime against art' and felt it was a waste of time.

The Plan

I ran 'Visualising Ideas Workshops' with A-Level Graphic Communication students across three second-year groups. In these workshop sessions, students collect imagery of other graphic designers and from this creating a 'Visual Essays'. The juxtaposition of imagery to create leverage between differing graphic forms that related to their personal creative tastes.

These visual essays (VE) are shared with their peers and a written review is created through this initial questioning:

1. **What's going on in this VE?**
2. **What was your first reaction to these images**
3. **Describe the direction this student is looking at?**
4. **Which image is most important on the VE?**
5. **Has the student considered the impact of typography?**
6. **What is missing from this VE?**
7. **If you could ask the student a question, what would you ask them?**
8. **What's meanings are being expressed on the VE?**
9. **What emotions do you feel when looking at this VE?**
10. **What is the title you'd give this VE?**
11. **What do you dislike about this VE?**
12. **What is beautiful about this VE?**
13. **What ideas do you want to steal this VE?**
14. **Would place the VE in a graphic field i.e. illustration, logo design, advertising...**
15. **What image can you add this VE?**

From these reviews student then will create journals from the centre out. At this point introduction or conclusions are not discussed, just ideas and making connections between images and at this point written work is grown from the discussion and balanced with the imagery to create a page spread that is visually thought-provoking.

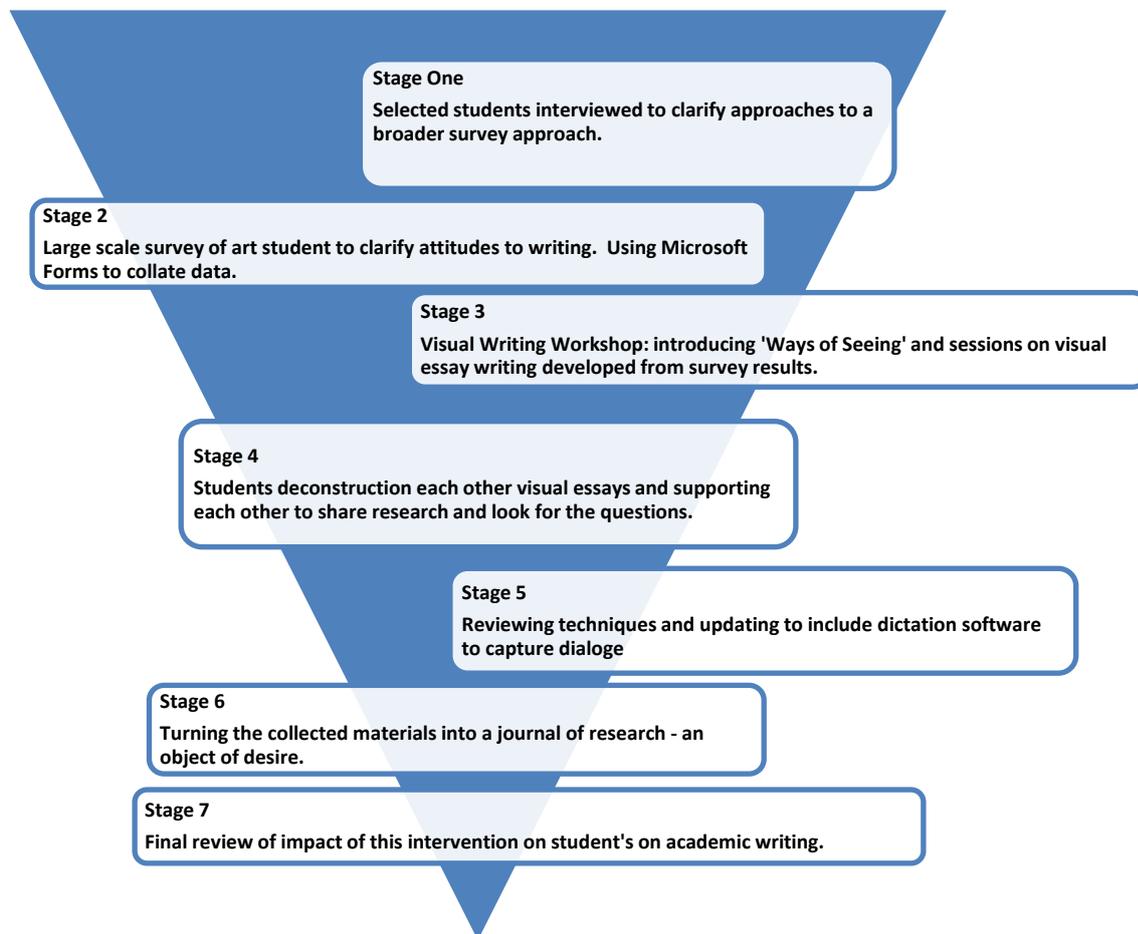
Once students had the bulk of the written materials and built their journals, only then

will they clarify their question to focus on an introduction and conclusion. This was to put personal research at the heart of the document and then letting learners discover their direction from their ramblings.

Key to the whole process is that the final document is something student wants to own and become for them an 'Object of Desire.' The hoping the student won't see the essay as a word-count but something that is personal to them and carries their individuality and a document they want to own. Also seeing there are other ways of structuring written work.

'A strong passion for any object will ensure success, for the desire of the end will point out the means.' William Hazlitt

Timeline



Ethical statement

This report intends to give a democratic voice to all students in the Art Faculty at Exeter College. As part of this project, I've conducted interviews and facilitated discussions with students, who are studying a creative subject on an A level programme, part of a three-element course of study. The students I've worked with are all aged between 16-18 and have the capacity to provide meaningful consent to their participation in the research project. Participants' voluntary consent was obtained before research got underway, and they were made aware of their right to withdraw from the project at any point, in accordance with paragraph 31 of the BERA guidelines (BERA 2018). Interviews or discussions conducted were recorded by audio/visual means and transcribed for potential inclusion in the report. Surveys were used within the presentation and dissemination of the results of the research, but all names and personal details of participants have been changed for this report. Data has been stored in accordance with GDPR (2018) and any publication of the findings will not breach agreements of confidentiality and anonymity. Part of our case study, we used social media platforms: Microsoft Forms within Exeter College VLE learning. Students were informed that participation and interactions would be monitored and analysed for the purposes of the research.

Initial Findings

Survey of 129 A-level Art Students:

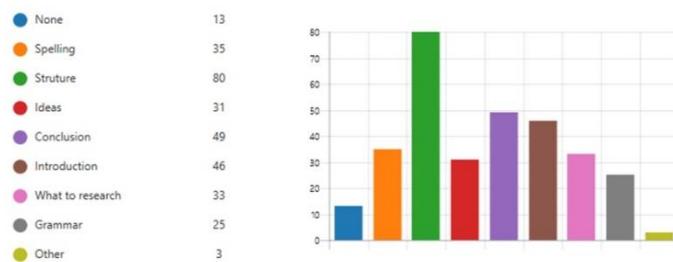
Do you enjoy creative writing?



Do you enjoy academic writing (research)?



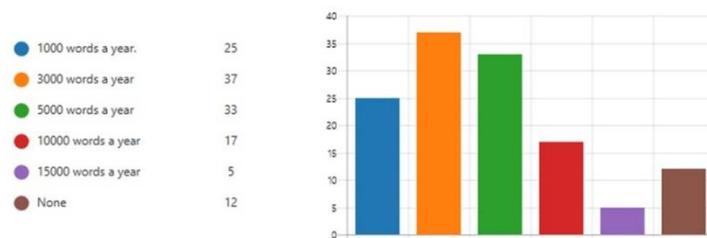
Is there any areas you fear when writing.



If it was part of a creative art course was to do a 10000 word research essay, would it put you off doing that course?



How much writing do you feel there should be on an creative arts based degree course?



Have you heard of the word 'dissertation'?



Interestingly the responses show from this survey that positively three-quarters of student have heard of the 'dissertation', but half of students surveyed felt 3000 words or less on a creative degree course. The key element students found difficult when approaching writing was structure. Although students had been offered different kinds of essay structure in the past from doing their GCSE English, few found it helpful. The comments below show some of the more thoughtful responses:

Teacher advice. One to one correction....PEAR point evidence analysis recap....it did the job but had little meaning to get points... making up waffle...RS essays better as they were an argument.

We had structured lessons at GCSE levels...but transferable to A level? Science teachers don't teach essay structure....Biology data correct but no creativity.

Yes, as I lived in Brazil, writing an essay is part of the final High school exam, so we have loads of training and in those lessons, we learnt new techniques to improve our writing.

I write whatever comes into my head and pray that it is good.

I have tried but it doesn't come easily as I was never properly taught how to write an essay so I'm still trying to dig it out and lack confidence.

However, a third of students asked just wrote 'No'. This possibly explains when students were asked if a 10000-word essay would put them off going to university.

7. If it was part of a creative art course was to do a 10000 word research essay, would it put you off doing that course?

[More Details](#)



Visual Ideas Workshop

The students were introduced to John Burger's 'Way of Seeing'. This ignited the students and they initially produced exciting visual essays with some finding it difficult not to add connecting text between their images. However, things began to fall apart when it came to their peers giving feedback. Even working with the question structure, most students didn't fully engage with the feedback process. The initial notetaking was very thin and gave little in the way of thoughtful or helpful comment that would greater depth to what the student had achieved already and didn't broaden their research of ideas. Discussing this with students I found they considered the notetaking burdensome and in the limited time of the lesson wanted to achieve their own coursework and saw the concept of feedback as the 'teacher's job'.

I still felt it was important that these projects were stretch and tested by others. So

Office 365 dictation software was introduced. Students were now able to dictate their feedback straight to their mobile phones and download it as a Word document. Using this technology turned the process of feedback into a game, like Tom Sawyer turning punishment into a pleasure, by getting other boys to whitewash the fence in Mark Twain's, 'The adventures of Tom Sawyer'. The feedback produced had a far higher depth of opinion from the students and greater interaction between student's essay writing across the three A-Level groups. Rather than being kept as a private task that was only communicated between teacher and student, now the whole group was involved in the research process and sharing ideas across the class.

The unintended consequences from the introduction of dictation software were student began using for all kinds of note-taking and some students put most of their essay together with it and no longer saw writing as a punishment, but like Tom Sawyer started to see it as a game. As one student said to me, *'I'm starting to like writing it's just like Snapchat, but is it cheating using my phone?'* showing how he disconnected different areas of communication. Considering new forms of communication as not authentic communication.

Object of Desire

"Work that only comes from the head isn't any good...You need to bring your body into your work." Austin Kleon

The final twist of the intervention was the presentation were the work as you can see in the picture the students created highly individual documents that they wanted to own.





From this work, students began to research deeper into the connections they had made to others in debates and written work. A-level art learners feel excited about and engagement in the theory of their subject. A-level art students make greater use of contextual information in their work. Opinions expressed in coursework had a greater depth of understanding and seeing academic writing less alien and something not to just cut and paste, but to support their creative journey. For some students who were put off the idea of University and the demands of academia have been encouraged to apply.

Recommendations and Key Findings

The conventions which conspire to position the research writer as a member of the academic community to create an 'institutional voice' that shut out alternative approaches to academic study, also shut out some students. Frank Coffield and Bill Williamson argue in the book 'From Exam Factories to Communities of Discovery', that we need to be creating 'structures of opportunity' in education and that:

"The most important debate to have about education is this: how can we help more people to engage in creative forms of new learning that will enable them to overcome not only the deep-seated, cumulative obstacles of inequality faced by the many but also the collective threats now faced by us all?"

The latter part of this quote refers to the educational funding cuts, but Coffield and Williamson argue for more collaborative dialogue between learners and educators. This intervention was created for art students to create a method for meaningful research and support a more inclusive and democratic educational system. This intervention tried to break the idea there was a simple linear way of putting research essays together. Students were encouraged to engage more deeply with the questioning an exploring at the heart of their research. Following ideas from John Burger's 'Ways of Seeing' and David Bowie's process of 'creative destruction' by taking lyrics and cutting them up to create something new and original by a series happy accident. This is nothing new, the process is described by Dada poet Tristan Tzara (1920):

- Take a newspaper.
- Take a pair of scissors.
- Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
- Cut out the article.
- Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
- Shake it gently.
- Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
- Copy conscientiously.
- The poem will be like you.
- And here are you a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

Moving on from this intervention, I would recommend Art based students:

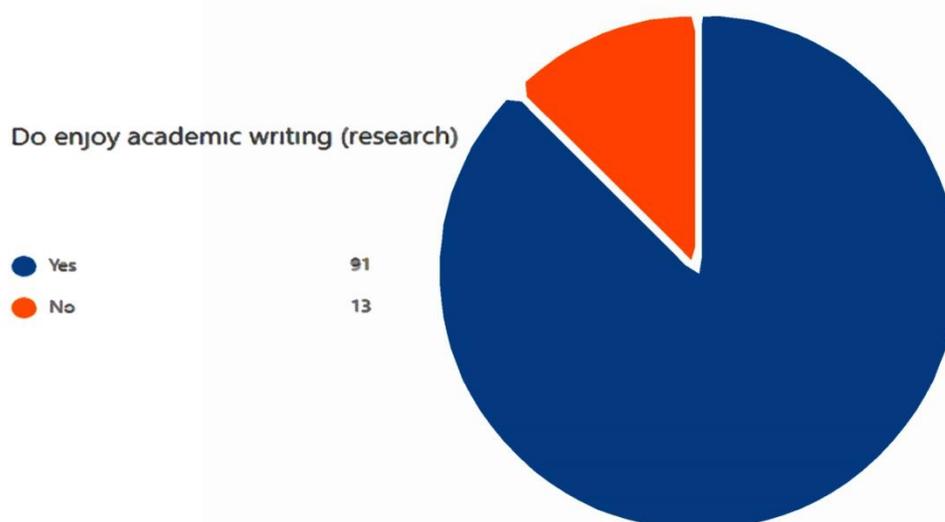
- a) Starting with the student's skill base when setting tasks, that they might consider alien to their core studies.
- b) For academic research consider working from the centre of a problem and not handing out a list solution to structuring a problem.

- c) Reconsidering the presentation and appearance of research and allowing it to become an art piece and not something separate to the Art student's studies.
- d) Current students are highly visually aware, working from experience and taking ideas/concept from the new online media. Illustrated essays should be considered valuable documentation, rather than a dissertation that put a word count first and encourages plagiarism.
- e) The teacher needs to keep fully aware of new technology to support literacy in the classroom and making greater use of mobile phones and advances in digital media.

Students, I believe need to be challenged in an order to build knowledge and we as teachers need to question our delivery and constantly update or practice to allow our students to have a voice. In the words of Socrates, 'The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.'

After making this intervention I surveyed 109 students about how they now felt about academic writing after taking part in this intervention. There was a significant increase in the number of students feeling confident with the idea of creating academic research and we had a small rise in the number of UCAS applications.

Survey of 104 A-level Art Students after intervention:



Bibliography

- Berger, J., (1972). *Ways Of Seeing*. Penguin Classic.
- Bates, B. (2015). *Learning theories simplified*. 1st ed. Sage Publications Ltd.
- Bird, J. and Gornall, S. (2016). *The art of coaching*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- Brock, A., (2016) *The growth mindset coach*. 1st ed. United Kingdom: Ulysses Press.
- Cross, N. (2005). *The coaching process*. 1st ed. Edinburgh: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- BERA (2011). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. London, British Educational Research Association.
- Coffield, F. et al. (2014). *Beyond Bulimic Learning: Improving Teaching in Further Education*. London, IOE.
- Coffield, F. and Williamson, B. (2012). *From exam factories to communities of discovery*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.
- Dweck, C. (2018). *Mindset*. 6th ed. Robinson.
- Elliott, R (1993). *Ways of Representing Research*. Strathprints.
- Gardner, H. (1999). *Intelligence reframed*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Gregson, M., Nixon, L., Pollard, A., Spedding, T. (2015). *Readings for Reflective Teaching in further, adult and vocational education*. London, Bloomsbury.
- Goffman, E. (1956). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin
- Hattie, J., Masters, D. and Birch, K. (2016). *Visible learning into action*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Ivanič, R. (1998). *Writing and identity*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kleon, A. (2012). *Steal like an artist*. New York, NY: Workman Pub., Co.
- Oecd.org. (2019). [online] Available at:
https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/The_Survey%20_of_Adult_Skills_Reader's_companion_Second_Edition.pdf [Accessed 1 Sep. 2019].
- Paul, R., Elder, L. (2007). *The Thinkers Guide to the Art of Socratic Questioning*. CA,
- Syed, M. (2011). *Bounce*. 1st ed. London: Fourth Estate.
- Twain, M. (1876). *The adventures of Tom Sawyer*.
- Weston, D. and Clay, B. (2018). *Unleashing great teaching*. 1st ed. Routledge.